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ABSTRACT

This paper gives a brief overview of the focus group method, its history, and usefulness for educational researchers and outlines the essential steps to a successful focus group. An example of the use of focus groups is given. The focus group originated in the 1920s in the social sciences, developed further in market research, and is undergoing a resurgence in the social sciences. The approach has evolved to become useful in educational research. In setting up focus groups, these issues are important: (1) purpose; (2) number of groups; (3) length of group; (4) moderator's guide; (5) moderator; (6) location and setup; (7) participants; (8) number of participants; (9) conducting the group; and (10) analyzing the data. Among the advantages to focus groups is the promotion of interactive discussion among stakeholders. A major disadvantage is data analysis, which can be tedious and difficult. A study of the instructional validity of a state's graduation examination illustrates the use of teacher and student focus groups. When evaluating programs, educational researchers should consider the use of focus groups during and after the implementation of the program as an excellent way to ascertain participants' attitudes. Two appendixes contain sample teachers' and students' group moderator guides. (Contains 34 references.) (SLD)

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Focusing on Focus Group Use in Educational Research

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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The use of focus groups has grown tremendously in the last decade, particularly in business and industry, and a focus group can be of tremendous use to the educational researcher. Focus groups can be used prior to quantitative procedures, along with quantitative procedures, after quantitative procedures, or alone as a qualitative research procedure (Krueger, 1988), although Barbour and Kitzinger (1999, p. 36) warn against the focus group as "the *sole* method" of inquiry. With effective planning, valuable information and feedback can be obtained in the development process for surveys, questionnaires, and even test items. Morgan (1988) and Edmunds (1999) list questionnaire development and hypothesis formulation as research efforts that lend themselves to the use of focus groups.

This paper gives a brief overview of the focus group method: its history, its usefulness for educational researchers, and the essential steps to a successful focus group. An example of the use of focus group research is given, followed by a brief conclusion.

A Brief History of Focus Group Use

The focus group originated in the 1920s in the social sciences, developed further after World War II in market research, and presently is undergoing a resurgence in the social sciences (Dickson, 2000). According to Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Goldstucker (1976), the focus group originally developed from the psychiatric group therapy method. It was used in World War II to increase military morale (Krueger, 1988). Business and industry adopted the focus group as a convenient method of obtaining input from clients and consumers. According to GroupsPlus Inc. (2000), the focus group is an "excellent way to discover the attitudes of customers, prospects, consumers and other target groups relative to a wide variety of different topics." The technique has also been used in sociology for many years, (see Znaniecki, 1934). As Krueger (1988, p. 20) indicated, the technique "is growing in popularity among other information seekers, such as social scientists, evaluators, planners, and educators." Barbour and Kitzinger (1999, p.1) cited a "three-fold increase in the number of focus group studies published in academic journals" in just the past few years. Focus group research has gained "increased acceptability within academic institutions" (Krueger, 1995, p.525), due to increased use and the insights it provides into the participants' experiences.

Usefulness in Educational Research

Emerson & Maddox (1997, p. 10) stated that ". . . focus groups are being included more often in the tool chests of educational and psychological researchers." Originally seen as a purely qualitative tool, the focus group has evolved into broader applications. The flexibility of the focus group has made it adaptable to the academic setting. Krueger (1988, p. 39) stated, "Increasingly, evaluation researchers are recognizing the benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative procedures, resulting in greater methodological mixes that strengthen the research

design." Krueger advocated using focus groups in the planning stages to develop questions and surveys that are both understandable and accepted and in the evaluation stages as part of a summative evaluation, as a follow-up to a survey, and to provide feedback to administrators. Dickson (2000) saw the focus group as being useful for several purposes: preparing a survey, interpreting findings, establishing participants' reactions to proposed change, and evaluating new programs and procedures. Bellenger et al. (1976) added to the list of possible uses that of generating hypotheses and interpreting previously obtained quantitative results. Franklin and Knight (1995) used focus groups to elicit student opinion; they found focus groups to be useful due to the amount of information obtained. Lederman (1990) indicated that the focus group was a useful tool for gathering data about educational and instructional effectiveness. Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996. p. 27) indicated, "Focus group interviews can be helpful in the development of questionnaires, surveys, and items for tests." In regard to survey development or item development, Higgenbotham and Cox (1979, p. 23) stated, "It is sometimes hard for the researcher to know how to structure a particular question, and focus groups can be helpful in this regard." Carefully planned focus groups can be an important aid in both formative and summative evaluations. The information obtained from participants enhances the quantitative data from other sources and gives a broader view of the situation being evaluated.

Getting the Most from a Focus Group

Knowing a few simple steps to follow while setting up the focus groups can make the process very worthwhile. This section outlines the main steps necessary to put the focus on obtaining valuable input from the focus group, for example, establishing the purpose of the group, selecting and training a moderator, choosing the participants with care, recording the data, summarizing the data. As with all research, designing the focus group is of utmost importance. Attention to the details of planning the focus group will improve the quality of data obtained from the group. Conducted properly, the focus group can provide immediate and representative feedback.

The steps necessary to conduct a worthwhile focus group are discussed by several authors (Curran, Bajjaly, Feehan, & O'Neill, 1998; Greenbaum, 1998; Greenbaum, 2000c; Quible, 1998; Vaughn et al., 1996). The planning stage involves setting specific goals for the focus group, determining the number of groups, deciding on the length of the meeting, developing a moderator's guide, selecting a moderator, choosing a location, and identifying the participants.

Purpose

The obvious first step is to establish the purpose for the group and to limit the range of the information desired. Setting specific goals and narrowing them to the essential information is crucial to conducting an effective focus group. If the goals are too broad, the focus group will be unable to concentrate on reaching consensus or providing useful information.

Number of Groups

The number of groups may need to be flexible. One should plan for enough groups to obtain the required information. However, if after the first few groups, no new information is forthcoming, there is no need to continue with the remaining groups. Calder (1977, p.44) indicates that one holds more focus groups "until the moderator can anticipate what is going to be said in the groups." Generally this occurs after the third or fourth group. Once the moderator and/or data analyst see that the groups are providing the same comments as previous groups, there is no need to convene further groups.

Length of Group

The type of participants may be instrumental in determining the length of time for which the groups meet. When meeting with a group for a marketing focus group, the time usually ranges from one and a half to two hours (Vaughn, et al, 1996). In a school setting, the time frame is generally somewhat shorter in order to allow students and/or teachers to meet during their study hall/planning period. A shorter meeting time reinforces the need for a well planned session. With a carefully planned moderator's guide and a homogeneous group of participants, the moderator should be able to obtain the necessary information in a school period.

Moderator's Guide

The moderator's guide is a "*map* to chart the course of the focus group interview" (Vaughn et al., 1996, p. 41). The guide should include an introduction, an ice breaker, clarification of terms, the questions, a recap of major themes, and closing statements. When the guide has a "clear structure" and the focus groups are "organized around a carefully developed discussion guide" (Emerson & Maddox, 1997, p. 11), the use of focus groups becomes more acceptable to traditional educational researchers. The guide also ensures that the focus group time is spent on the topic. The guide should be seen as a plan to keep the discussion focused and be sure all issues are explored; it is not meant to be a rigid step-by-step formula (Lederman, 1990).

Moderator

Bellenger et al. (1976, p. 13) indicated , "The one thing on which everyone agrees with respect to focus group interviews is that the moderator's role is of prime importance to the success." Greenbaum (2000a) goes so far as to state that selecting the right moderator "is by far the most important element for effective focus research." The role of the moderator must be clearly defined. His or her role includes determining the logistics, working with the facility, developing the guide, and implementing the group. Greenbaum (1998, pp. 77-79) lists several requirements for an "effective" moderator including: possessing superior listening ability and excellent short-term auditory memory, being well organized, having a high energy level, being personable, having well-above-average intelligence, having relevant experience, and possessing good communication skills. Edmunds (1999) adds flexibility, time management skills, and a good personality to this list, and Vaughn et al. (1996) add the ability to create and maintain a comfortable environment. Michell (1999) notes that the moderator must be aware of the focus groups members who are not participating. In many situations the moderator must also be able to analyze the data from the focus group.

Location and Setup

The choice of a location for the focus group depends to a large degree on the type of focus group being held. When working on a school topic, such as survey development or item development, it might be best to hold the group in the school or its immediate vicinity for the convenience of the participants. For all focus groups one needs a comfortable room, spacious enough for an appropriate seating arrangement conducive to group participation. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) recommend an easily accessible venue that is familiar, comfortable, and free from interruption. Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) indicate that a circular seating arrangement with the moderator seated as one of the group is most conducive to full and spontaneous participation. It is important to remember that comfortable, relaxed surroundings tend to enhance the quality of the data collected (Asbury, 1995; Krueger, 1995).

Participants

The selection of participants for the focus group is an important consideration. Will the participants be key stakeholders in a school situation or a random sampling? The purpose of the focus group will help determine the composition of the group participants which is generally a structured rather than a random sample according to Barbour and Kitzinger (1999). Focus groups "enfranchise . . . constituents. They enjoy the chance to meet and greet, . . . to *be heard.*" (Curran, et al., 1998, p. 177). Tynan & Drayton (1988, p.31) recommend a homogeneous composition to prevent a "struggle for common ground." For instance, if the focus groups are being conducted to pilot a student survey/questionnaire, the researcher would want both teachers and students to participate. However, having teachers and students in the same focus group might be intimidating to the students. Being in a homogeneous group helps to set certain participants at ease. Merton et al. (1956, p. 137) also recommended homogeneous groups; they suggested that socially and intellectually homogeneous groups were more productive, but noted that for most studies, "*educational homogeneity* outranks all other kinds in making for effective interviews with groups." A homogeneous group establishes an atmosphere in which participants feel they can participate candidly.

Number of Participants

Another consideration is the size of the groups. Most authors (Asbury, 1995; Greenbaum, 1998; Tynan & Drayton, 1988; Vaugn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) recommend six to twelve members. With a larger number of participants, it may be difficult for everyone to participate. A smaller number may put too much stress on individuals. Krueger (1988, p. 27) states that the group should be "small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions."

Conducting the Group

Once the preliminary work is completed and the group is convened, the moderator is in charge. The focus group should begin with an introduction by the moderator. During the introduction the moderator greets the participants and explains the purpose of the focus group. The moderator also establishes the ground rules for the group: briefly describing his or her role, disclosing how the group discussion will be recorded, explaining the confidentiality of participants' comments,

indicating that participants' opinions are neither right nor wrong, and requesting that participants speak one at a time.

After the moderator introduces the focus group concept, there may be a brief ice breaker or get-acquainted period when the participants introduce themselves. Once this is completed, the moderator begins to elicit information from the participants by presenting them with the stimuli to be used or the questions to be addressed following the preset moderator's guide.

When the focus group has completed its work, the moderator summarizes the information obtained and allows the participants the opportunity to revise the recorded input if necessary. Then the moderator reiterates the importance of their contributions, thanks the participants, and closes the group.

Analyzing the Data

Once the groups are concluded, the researcher must summarize/analyze the data and draw his/her conclusions. The analyses should be done as soon as possible after the focus group meeting. When the purpose of the focus group has been to critique a survey or questionnaire, the researcher takes the consensus of the group and makes appropriate revisions. If the focus group was held to formulate hypotheses, the hypotheses are probably fairly developed by the end of the meeting. If the group was held to investigate attitudes, the researcher will have to analyze the moderator's notes, tapes, and other information using established qualitative data analysis techniques. The "process of analysis is the least agreed on and the least well developed" (Carey, 1995, p. 487) of all aspects of focus group research.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Advantages

There are several advantages to using focus groups. They promote "interactive discussions among key school stakeholders. . ." (Emerson & Maddox, 1997, p. 11). When held in a school setting, students and teachers can participate with both groups being afforded the opportunity to contribute. Quible (1998) pointed out that the comments of one participant help to stimulate reactions form the others. The focus group format also brings a depth of understanding and a greater spontaneity than individual interviews according to Emerson and Maddox (1997). Merton et al. (1956) saw focus groups as widening the range of responses and releasing inhibitions of the members.

Disadvantages

Disadvantages exist with the use of focus groups. A major disadvantage is that of the data analysis; due to the nature of the data collected in focus groups, the analysis can be tedious and difficult (Krueger, 1995). There may be one participant who attempts to control the discussion; there may be pressure to respond in a certain manner. Some participants may not feel comfortable with the lack of confidentiality. The moderator may not take note of the important things that are said or left unsaid by the participants. The information obtained may not be as in-

from individual interviews. Bellenger et al. (1976) reinforced that the data from a focus group may not be generalizable to other groups. Calder (1977, p.44) stated that focus group research "must stand alone!" He indicated that generalizability is not meaningful in an exploratory approach since one is generating ideas for constructs such as hypotheses.

Example of Focus Group Work

The following example illustrates the use of the focus group to aid researchers in designing surveys for use by both students and teachers in a statewide instructional validity study. The study was conducted to investigate the instructional validity of a state's graduation exam. Every student who took the graduation exam was to complete a survey in one of the four subject areas. A sample of teachers from every school in the state was selected to complete the teacher survey. Because of the importance of the study, the researchers wanted to eliminate any potential problems on the surveys. To ensure that the surveys for both teachers and students were clear, would obtain the needed information, and could be completed in a reasonable amount of time, we held focus groups with teachers and with students in several school systems. We developed preliminary forms of both the teacher and the student surveys based on the state course of study. With the help of the state department of education, we selected urban and rural school systems to participate in the focus groups. Times for the focus groups were selected during the school day so that a group of six to eight teachers could participate by subject area and so that similar groups of students could participate by area. Teachers came during their departmental meeting time; students attended during their study hall. A focus group for each subject area was held for students at each school, and teachers from each subject area were interviewed at each school. Because the surveys were based on the state course of study, it was necessary to obtain input from both teachers and students as to whether the items were appropriate at each level. The two researchers on this project served as the moderators for the focus groups.

Teacher Groups

The teacher focus groups began with introductions and a brief explanation of why we were meeting and how the results of the discussion would be used. Teachers were very interested in participating since this was the first year that the exam would be required for graduation. The teacher groups were asked to address four questions. Were the instructions for the teacher survey clear and understandable? Did the teacher survey completely address the curriculum? Was the student survey written so that all students would be able to understand and complete it? Were there any specific items needing further explanation? The teacher groups met for about an hour. They critiqued both the teacher and the student surveys, noting better vocabulary choices, clearer examples, easier instructions. The consensus responses were reviewed at the end of the meeting, and the participants were thanked for their participation. Recommendations from the teacher focus groups were used to revise and finalize the surveys. The moderator's guide for the teacher focus groups comprises Appendix A.

Student Groups

Using Krueger's (1988) guidelines, the student focus groups were designed to last no more than 40 minutes. High school students are accustomed to class changes every 50 to 60 minutes, so the 40 minute format was planned to prevent a loss of their attention. To prevent unnecessary class disruption, students were taken from study hall to participate in the focus group. After an introduction during which the reason for the focus group was given and introductions were made, the student groups were asked to take the student survey. Each group took one subject area survey. This provided an estimate of the time required to complete the actual survey. Then the students were asked to indicate any questions that were ambiguous or that needed further explanation and any examples that needed to be clarified. The aim was to make the language simple enough that students would comprehend the item and its example, then be able to indicate whether they had been taught the concept prior to the exam. The student focus groups were 30 to 45 minutes each. At the end of the meeting, students were thanked for helping the researchers and told again the purpose of the focus group. They were also assured that their suggested revisions would be taken into consideration with those of other student and teacher focus group members before the final versions of the surveys were prepared. The students' recommendations were used along with those of teachers to revise and finalize the student survey. The moderator's guide for the student focus groups comprises Appendix B.

Using the Focus Group Results

By using the two sets of focus groups, we were able to develop better surveys that would provide cleaner data for our study. Teacher groups were particularly helpful in clarifying the instructions for completion of the teacher surveys and in simplifying the examples on the student surveys. Because both teachers and students in rural and urban school systems had contributed to the development process, the state and the school systems felt that the surveys were more appropriate than if they had been prepared totally by an outside source.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As Greenbaum (1988, p. ix) indicated, "Focus groups can be an extremely valuable part of an overall research program if used correctly." To be worthwhile, one must put effort into the planning for focus groups, have the right moderator, and recruit good group members (Greenbaum,, 2000c). Unless the moderator is well-prepared and the group members are willing to participate, the amount of information obtained may not warrant the time and effort expended. The moderator must be aware of the purpose of the group and be able to garner the needed information from the group members. Krueger (1988, p. 18) defines the focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment . . . The discussion is relaxed, comfortable, and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion." The information obtained from a focus group is only as good as the planning that went into it, the moderator who conducted it, and the analysis of the data that were obtained. The focus group is a relatively easy way to obtain feedback from program participants or to follow-up on results obtained from

quantitative studies. Often the data take on a different connotation when seen from the vantage point of the focus group participants.

When conducting evaluations of various programs, educational researchers should consider the use of focus groups both during and after the implementation of the program. By interviewing various stakeholders during the process, one can get a clearer overall idea of the program's success. The focus group shows great potential for use in the work setting to investigate training needs, morale, and many other topics. More in-depth information can be garnered from the focus groups participants interactions than from a questionnaire. It is an excellent means of obtaining participants' attitudes towards many topics.

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Appendix A

Moderator's Guide - Teachers' Focus Group

Introduction

Hello, I'm _____ from the Center for Educational Accountability at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Could each of you tell us your name and subject area?

Purpose

You've been asked to participate in this group to help with the design of surveys that will be used in an instructional validity study of the High School Graduation Exam. Instructional validity is an indication that the students taking the HSGE have had the opportunity to learn the material on the exam. A sample of teachers from the state will complete the surveys in March, at the same time that every 11th grade student completes a survey in one of the four subject areas on the exam. The information obtained from the teacher sample will be used to determine the percentage of students who have been taught each skill tested on the HSGE.

Our goals today are: 1) to clarify the instructions for the teacher survey and to ensure that the survey questions are appropriate and 2) to check the clarity and appropriateness of the student surveys.

Instructions

Each of you is being given a set of instructions and a survey. For the first part of our session, we would like for you to read the instructions and complete the survey. This will help us establish the amount of time needed for the surveys and help us find any flaws in the instructions.

(Note the time needed to complete survey.)

Now that everyone has completed the survey, let's discuss the instructions.

If you would start with the first paragraph. . . .

Are there any questions or concerns about the wording? . . .

Let's continue with the instructions themselves.

Steps 1-4: Any questions or possible misunderstanding here?

Note: Any questions or possible misunderstanding here?

Example: Any questions or possible misunderstanding here?

Please feel free to give your comments and suggestions. . . .

Teacher Survey
Now if you would look over the survey you were given. Did you feel comfortable completing the survey after reading the instructions? Why or why not?

Since you have taught from the state curriculum guide, is the wording of the skills listed on the survey familiar to you?

Do you have any suggestions for improving the survey?

Student survey
Please look over the student survey for your subject area. Check for clarity of vocabulary and of examples.

Discuss the teacher comments on student survey.

Summary
Summarize the overall opinion of the group about the instructions and the surveys.

Closing
Thank you so much for your time and effort today. We will use the information from this group and others across the state to revise the instructions and surveys before they are administered in March. Enjoy the rest of your day, and thank you again for your help with this project.

Appendix B

Moderator's Guide - Student Focus Group

Introduction

Hi, let's introduce ourselves. I'm _____ from the Center for Educational Accountability at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. And you? . . .

I'd like to thank you for being here. You've been asked to participate in this group to help with the design of surveys that will be used to determine whether students have been taught all the skills tested on the High Graduation Exam. A survey in one of the four subject areas - reading comprehension, language, math, or science- will be completed by every 11th grade student in the state prior to the exam.

Purpose

Our goal today is to be sure the sample survey is understandable and simple to complete.

Each of you is being given a sample survey. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey, and then we will discuss it.

(Note time required for students to complete survey.)

The response for each item is **YES** or **NO**. In each case, the question is "Have you EVER been taught this in School?" What does the question mean to you? . . .

Pay particular attention to the word "EVER." You will probably not have been taught all these concepts this year. You may have been taught some of these things in the 7th grade. But the question is were you EVER taught this, so answer as truthfully as you can.

Does the question need to be reworded?

How can it be improved?

Are the items clear? Are the examples helpful? Are there any items that you feel need to be revised?

Summary

Summarize the overall opinion of the group.

Closing

Thank you very much for your time and effort today. We will use the information from this group and others across the state to revise the surveys before they are administered in March. You may go back to your class, and thank you again for your help with this project.